

## HARVARDBUSINESS.ORG

### Managing Middlescence

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Robert Morison, Tamara Erickson, Ken Dychtwald

---

#### The Idea in Brief

Burned out. Bottlenecked. Bored. That's the current lot of many midcareer employees—those 35 to 54 years of age. Thirty percent of these **middlescents** work 50+ hours per week, while only 33% feel energized by their jobs. And many lament that their workplace offers few opportunities to try new things.

If your company's like most, midcareer managers and employees make up half your workforce. Neglect their discontent, and you risk losing valued performers who seek exciting work elsewhere. This is a dangerous development—considering the brain drain that'll soon hit when the vanguard of baby boomers retires. Disaffected middlescents who stay because they need the money take an even worse toll: Their lack of energy, innovation, and focus erodes your firm's productivity.

How to avoid these losses? Tap into your middlescents' hunger for renewal by helping them launch into new, more productive, more meaningful roles and careers. Fresh assignments enable middlescents to acquire new skills. Job changes help them develop new specialties. And training expands their business knowledge and stokes their desire to learn more.

You're probably already using such simple and inexpensive career revitalization techniques on your stars. Extend them to *all* your midcareer employees: They'll reward you with renewed commitment and productivity, as well as reduced replacement costs—immediately.

---

#### The Idea in Practice

Use these strategies to revitalize middlescents' careers:

##### Fresh Assignments

Offer new assignments in different locations or parts of your organization to leverage middlescents' existing skills and contacts while helping them acquire new ones.

General Electric taps experienced managers to integrate new acquisitions—giving them a change of scene and bringing to bear their extensive organizational know-how.

## Career Changes

Provide attractive internal career changes to help midsescentals develop new specialties.

Early in his 30+ years with Pitney Bowes, Dave Nassef served as a factory personnel manager and then marketer. When the company centralized HR, he was one of the few HR managers with manufacturing and marketing experience. At 40, he took on HR responsibility for half the company. Nassef's additional careers within Pitney Bowes include corporate ombudsman and company representative in Washington.

## Mentoring

Encourage midsescentals to mentor less-seasoned employees. Your midcareer managers will relish giving back to their organization and making new social connections in the workplace.

At Intel, a companywide employee database tracks skills attained and needed and matches employees with mentors—even if they're in a different country. Both mentors and protégés take classes to learn ways to maximize the mutual benefit of their relationship.

## Fresh Training

Don't assume your midsescentals don't need training. Provide brief introductions to new business areas to expand their perspectives and trigger their interest in learning more. Use refresher courses and in-depth education to help them strengthen or develop their skills.

The U.K.'s National Health Service is responding to a chronic nursing shortage by training seasoned aides to become nurses.

## Sabbaticals

Provide paid sabbaticals: They cost less than replacing disaffected midsescentals, and most people return from sabbaticals more committed than ever.

At Wells Fargo, employees with five or more years of service and qualifying performance ratings can work in community service settings of their choosing for up to four months while receiving full pay and benefits. One employee traveled to Armenia to help women establish businesses. The company reaped good publicity, and the employee returned to work highly energized and recommitted.

## Leadership Development

Just because midcareer workers are older doesn't mean they don't aspire to higher roles. Give them access to leadership development programs to rejuvenate them *and* stock your leadership pipeline.

Health insurer Independence Blue Cross has put one-third of its top 600 people—most of them middlecents—through a leadership program. It includes a weeklong session at the Wharton School, individual coaching and career planning, and work on important business projects.

- [Purchase the full-length Harvard Business Review article here.](#)
- [Visit Harvard Business Online.](#)
- [See more on Leadership & Managing People at HBR Online.](#)

Copyright 2006 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.

---

## Further Reading

### Articles

#### **[It's Time to Retire Retirement](#)**

*Harvard Business Review*

March 2004

by Ken Dychtwald, Tamara Erickson, and Bob Morison

A key to combating the malaise of middlecence is to keep midcareer employees engaged well beyond traditional retirement age. This is crucial—considering the labor shortage that will strike as boomers retire during the coming decades. The authors explain how to replace the traditional notion of retirement—whereby people stop working at a certain age—with a more flexible one that encourages people to become lifelong contributors to your company. Strategies include enabling retired employees to return on a part-time basis as independent contractors; offering flexible work arrangements such as job sharing and telecommuting; and creating a culture that honors experience—for instance, by highlighting older workers' achievements in company newsletters.

#### **[Job Sculpting: The Art of Retaining Your Best People](#)**

*Harvard Business Review*

September–October 1999

by Timothy Butler and James Waldroop

Here's another way to keep your middlecents engaged: give them work that appeals to their deepest life interests. Most people possess one to three of eight basic interests—which include theory development and conceptual thinking, counseling and mentoring, application of technology, quantitative analysis, creative production, and influence through language and ideas. Uncover middlecents' life interests by asking them for their views on career satisfaction and observing them at work. Then enable them to express their deeply embedded life interests—by adding new responsibilities, providing a change in assignment, or even facilitating a transfer to another department or function in the company.

Book

## **The War for Talent**

Harvard Business School Press

2001

by Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones, and Beth Axelrod

If you lose your midcareer employees to disaffection, you'll soon fall behind rival companies in the approaching war for talent. The authors examine the implications of the war—especially the shortage of managerial talent that all too many companies will face. Drawing on their own research, which includes surveys of 13,000 executives and case studies of 27 companies, the authors map out five bold imperatives for attracting, developing, and retaining top-notch managerial talent. Examples include crafting a winning employee value proposition, rebuilding your recruiting strategy, and weaving development into your organization. Apply these strategies, the authors maintain, and you'll see a noticeable impact within a year.

## About the Authors

---

**Robert Morison** (rfmorison@concoursgroup.com) is an executive vice president and the director of research at the Concoors Group, an advisory services firm in Kingwood, Texas.

**Tamara Erickson** (tjerickson@concoursgroup.com) is an executive officer at the Concoors Group and the president of the Concoors Institute, the firm's research and education arm.

**Ken Dychtwald** (kendychtwald@agewave.com) is the founding president and CEO of Age Wave, a San Francisco-based think tank and consulting firm focused on the maturing marketplace and workforce. They are the coauthors of the forthcoming Harvard Business School Press book *Workforce Crisis*, from which this article was adapted.

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.